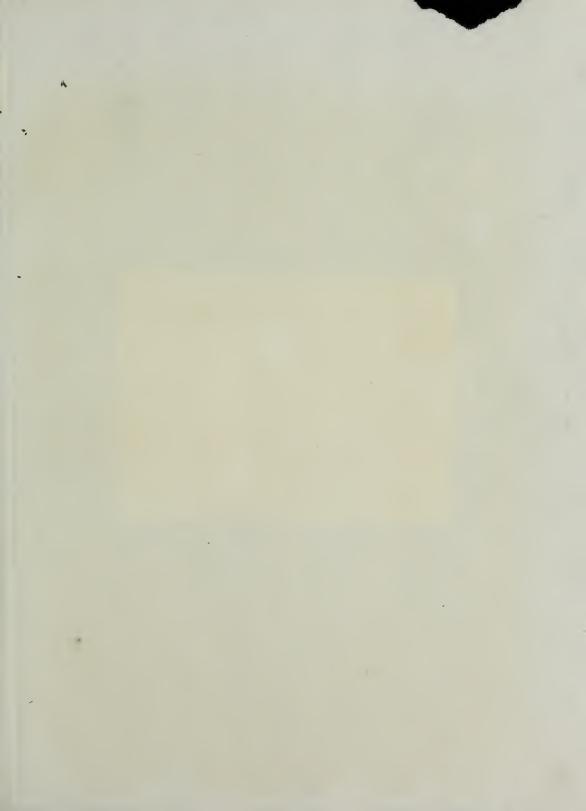


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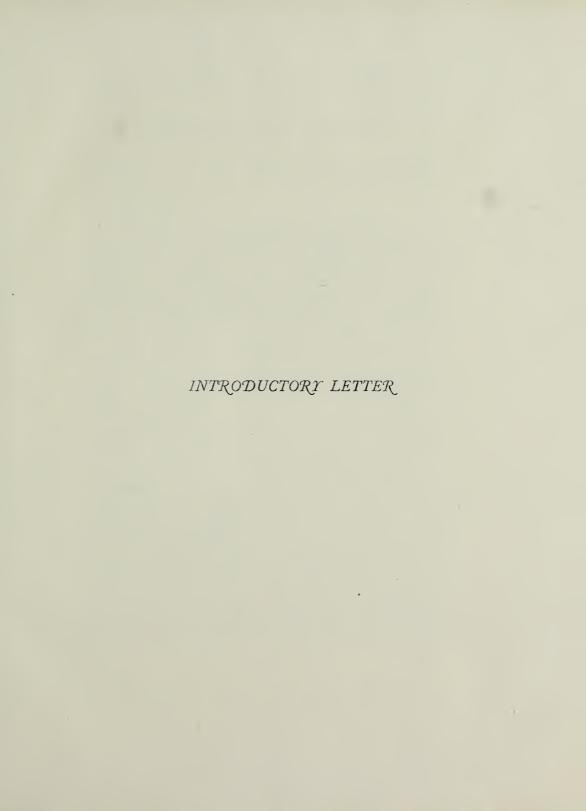
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Robert Gares

THE FEATHER BED BY ROBERT GRAVES

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INTRODUCTORY LETTER

TO

JOHN RANSOME, THE AMERICAN POET.

My dear Ransome,

Will you accept the dedication of this poem which seems naturally yours? It was more than a year writing without losing much of the excitement of the original scheme, but when on the cooling of inspiration constructional flaws appeared, these proved to be beyond help of riveting and surface tinkering, so the edition is small and very few review copies will go out. Still the poem is a necessary signpost to those friends of mine who have found the change between the two halves of my recent collection of lyrics, Whipperginny, inexplicably abrupt: and though dissatisfied I am not ashamed. It would be as well, from other considerations altogether, not to let the honest burghers of Nashville, Tenn., already scandalized by your Poems about God, see a copy of the Featherbed: but if this should happen and they demand an explanation, tell them that I have no anticonstitutional intentions. Explain that it is a study of a fatigued mind in a fatigued body and under the stress of an abnormal conflict, that they can read it, if they will, as a cautionary tale after the style of John Bunyan's unregenerate Mr Badman, only that Badman was unregenerate (wasn't he?) to the last, while I leave my young man in the throes of nightmare. Assure them that neither does the author nor in a more normal mood would the hero of the poem himself imagine convent

life to be what it here seems to be; but that the staggering rebuff to the young man's typical bullying attitude in love leads him to invent this monstrous libel in compensation; which libel is merely flattery to his own

wounded pride.

The psychological interest of the piece for me, now I have finished, is in the way that the logical argument broken by circlings of associative thought, all however relevant to the emotional disturbance, is continually being caught up again with an effort by the drowsy intellect. When at last the sour grapes idea, with its accompanying fantastics, has determined a reasonable and apparently final decision of rupture both with the girl herself and with the traditional religion she represents, the effort relaxes and the mind is overborne in sleep by nightmares, its revolutionary enthusiasm flattened by the reaction of tradition. The Morning Star theme is an interpolation by the outside Orator to stabilize the drama which without some such solution comes dangerously near a manifesto of atheism.

When you visit us in England I want to talk to you about Lucifer and explain how I had been reading the Old and New Testaments while writing this poem. Briefly in this way, as a record of the progressive understanding of God throughout the ages by a single representative race, the Jews. God is presented in three degrees at least. There is God the creator of the race of man, but of man still animal of the animals, whose daughters the sons of Adam found fair; let us call that God, Saturn. Then there is Jehovah or Jove, Saturn's successor: the Garden of Eden is the perfect symbolic expression of the birth of Jehovah. It is more than a fable of the dawn of sex consciousness, it dramatizes man's recognition of the end of a long biological phase, and the birth pangs of the new experimental period called civilization. The old heritage of self-seeking instinct, in conflict with a new principle of social order found necessary for the further survival of the race, split the primitive idea of God into two, the ideas of Good and Evil, Good being the approval by the social mind of those non-conscious workings of the body which further its aims, Evil being the condemnation of the old Adam inclinations which run counter to it. This idea of Good then is Jehovah, the God of the present, predominantly male, violent, blundering, deceitful, with great insistence on uniformity of rites duties and taboos, at whatever cost to the individual; Jehovah's greatest champion I found in Moses.

Finally there is Lucifer, the God of the future, only a weakling as yet, the hope of eventual adjustment between ancient habits and present needs. As the spirit of reconciliation, Lucifer puts out of date the negative virtue of Good fighting with Evil, and proposes an Absolute Good which we can now conceive of as Peace.

The doctrine of mutual responsibility for error, and of mutual respect between individuals, sexes, classes, groups, and nations, a higher conception than the eye for an eye and tooth for a tooth doctrine of Jehovah, is This ideal anarchy is the aspect of God momentarily seen, I thought, by Jesus Christ, before him prophesied by Isaiah and before him by Melchizedek; but since fallen even among Christians under the renewed tyranny of Jehovah. The story of Lucifer's fall is clearly written in the Acts of the Apostles; where the violence of Moses towards the man who gathered sticks on the Sabbath Day is worthily imitated by Peter when he strikes dead Ananias and Sapphira for a partial witholding of a voluntary gift; where the low cunning of Jacob with Esau is matched by Paul's stirring up the partizanship of Saducee against Pharisee while preaching the doctrine of tolerance.

This Light-Bringer Lucifer has been persistently misidentified by the priests of Jehovah with the spirit of Evil, their God's arch-enemy. But I would have it put like this: if John Milton had paused to enquire why Jesus Christ promised his followers the Morning Star as a reward for virtue, Milton would have been spared the compunction which certainly was besetting him in Paradise Lost for having conceived of his Prince of Darkness

as so much of a gentleman.

One day I must give you the full history of the famous encounter between the archangel Michael and Lucifer (outlined in the Epistle of Jude) when Lucifer asked the riddle still current in English speaking nurseries and Michael dared not answer or even curse him, because an open discussion of this particular point might prove dangerous to the fortunes of Jehovah. In the *Revelations* chapter which provides the familar lesson for All Saints' Day we hear that Michael had to admit the implied charge by resorting to violence. But guess the riddle and you shall have the answer given you; this is the proper course communication should take between poets.

And so yours in all good will,

ROBERT GRAVES.

Islip, Oxon. August, 1922. THE FEATHER BED



THE FEATHER BED

PROLOGUE

In sudden cloud that blotting distance out Confused the compass of the traveller's mind, Biassed his course, three times from the hill's crest Trying to descend but with no track to follow, Nor visible landmark—three times he had struck The same sedged pool of steaming desolation, The same black monolith rearing up before it. This third time then he paused to recognize The Witches' Cauldron only known before By hearsay, fly-like on whose rim he had crawled Three times and three times dipped to climb again Its uncouth sides, so to go crawling on.

By falls of scree, moss-mantled slippery rock,
Wet bracken, drunken gurgling watercourses,
He escaped limping at last, and broke the circuit
Travelling down and down; but smooth descent
Interrupted by new lakes and ridges,
Sprawling unmortared walls of boulder granite,
Marshes; one arm hung bruised where he had fallen,
Blood welled a sticky trickle from his cheek,
Mist gathering in his eye-brows ran full beads
Down to his eyes, making them smart and blur.

At last he blundered on some shepherd's hut— He thought, the hut took pity and appeared— With mounds of peat and welcome track of wheels Which he now followed to a broad green road Running from right to left; but still at fault Whether he stood this side or that of the hill, The mist being still on all, with little pause He chose the easier way, the downward way. Legs were dog-tired already, only the road, The slow descent with some relief of guidance Maintained his shambling five miles to the hour Coloured with day dreams. Then a finger post Broke through the mist, pointing into his face, But when he stopped to read gave him no comfort. Seventeen miles to—somewhere, God knows what! The paint was weathered to a mere acrostic Which cold unfocussed eyes could never read— But jerking a derisive thumb behind it Up a rough stream-wet path "THE WITCHES' CAULDRON ONE MILE." Only a mile For two good hours of stumbling steeplechase! There was a dead snake by some humorous hand Twined on the pointing finger; far away A bull roared hoarsely, but all else was mist.

Then anger came upon him, in which heat He fell into deep thought and rhymes came strung Faster than speech might have kept pace with them. The Snake, the Bull!

What laughter was it, ended His allegory and startled the graceful hare That secure in the mist came leaping down towards him? Witch in disguise, emissary of witches? Swiftly he takes a stone up, hurls it at her, Chases her, bawling childish angry threats; She screams. Now with red shame sorrow floods back Making his journey by twice three miles longer As though once revisiting the witches, Those unclean—it stood symbol in his mind

For what, but what? He never wished her harm—She being a hare and having innocent eyes—It was her fault for blundering on him there. He never wished her harm, she should have known His angry fit, frustration, weariness Breaking a gentler mood. With slackening steps He once more takes the homeward road, that is, If it does lead home; it's making uphill now And narrowing sadly. That fool finger-post Had only snakes to brag about and witches, And the bull roared no very helpful threat.



THE FEATHER BED

"Goodbye, but now forget all that we were Or said, or did to each other, here's goodbye. Send no more letters now, only forget We ever met..." and the letter maunders on In the unformed uncompromising hand That witnesses against her, yet provides Extenuation and a grudging praise. Rachel to be a nun! Postulate now For her noviciate in a red brick convent: Praying, studying, wearing uniform, She serves the times of a tyrannic bell, Rising to praise God in the early hours With atmosphere of filters and stone stairs, Distemper, crucifixes and red drugget, Dusty hot-water pipes, a legacy-library...

Sleep never comes to me so tired as now Leg-chafed and footsore with my mind in a blaze Troubling this problem over, vexing whether To beat Love down with ridicule or instead To disregard new soundings and still keep The old course by the uncorrected chart, (The faithful lover, his unchanging heart) Rachel, before goodbye Obscures you in your sulky resignation Come now and stand out clear in mind's eye Giving account of what you were to me And what I was to you and how and why,

Saying after me, if you can say it, "I loved."

Rachel so summoned answers thoughtfully
But painfully, turning away her head,
"I lived and thought I loved, for I had gifts
Of most misleading, more than usual beauty,
Dark hair, grey eyes, capable fingers, movement
Graceful and certain; my slow puzzled smile
Accusing of too much ingenuousness
Yet offered more than I could hope to achieve,
And if I thought I loved, no man would doubt it."
So speaks the image as I read her mind,
Or is it my pride speaks on her behalf,
Ventriloquizing to deceive myself?
Anger, grief, jealousy, shame confuse the issue,
Her beauty is a truth I can not blink
However angry, jealous, sad, ashamed.

Dissolve, image, dissolve! Make no appeal to the hunter in my nature, Leave me to self-reproach in my own time; If I too promised more than you could meet, Your beauty overrode my sense of fate And fitness, with extravagant pretence. Is it true that we were lovers once, or nearly? Lovers should sleep together on one pillow Clasped in each others' arms with lip to lip, Their bed should be a masterpiece of ease, A mother-of-pearl embrace for its twin pearls. But where do you sleep now, and where am I? Disdaining all the comforts of old use We fall apart, are made ridiculous. You in your cell toss miserably enough Under thin blankets on a springless couch, And I two hundred miles away or further Wallow in this feather bed,

With nothing else to rest my gaze upon Than flowery wall-paper, bulging and stained, And two stern cardboard signals "God is love," and "I was a stranger and ye took Me in," Ye took me in, took me in, took me in, The train of my thought straggles, loses touch, Piles in confusion, takes the longer road, Runs anyhow, heads true only by chance. Sacred Carnivals trundle through my mind, With Rhyme-compulsion mottoing each waggon. God's Love, the Holy Dove, and Heaven above Sin, deadly Sin, Begin, the Fight to Win Ye took me in; inn; inn;—and now a jolt Returns me consciousness, and weary Logic Gathers her snapped threads up. A mouldy inn Offensive with cockchafers, sour and musty, All night the signboard creaks and the blinds bang, The cupboards groan, the draught under the door Flurries the carpets of this inn, this inn. How I came here? Where else could I be bettered? Loneliness drew me here and cloudy weather With cold Spring rains to chill me through and through Pelting across the mountains, purging away Affection for a fault, restoring faith So God is Love? Admitted; still the thought Is Dead Sea fruit to angry baffled lovers Lying sleepless and alone in double beds, Shaken in mind, harassed with hot blood fancies. Break the ideal, and the animal's left Which this ideal stood as mask to hide. Then the hot blood with no law hindering it Drums and buffets suddenly at the heart And seeks a vent with what lies first to hand.

But yet no earthbound evil spirit comes Taking advantage of my unwrought mind,

Tempting me to a gay concubinage, In likeness of some ancient queen of heaven Ardent and ever young. The legends say They come to hermits so, and holy saints, Disguised in a most blinding loveliness; Disrobe about the good man's bed and twitch His blankets off and make as if to kiss him With sighs of passion irresistibly sweet. Yet he has power to turn on them, to cry "In the name of Christ begone!" and go they must. If I were a hermit now—but being myself I never give them challenge, never bend Kneeling at my bedside for hours together Praying aloud for chastity—that's the bait Certain to draw them from their shadowy caves, Their broken shrines and rockbound fastnesses— Praying against the World, the Flesh, the Devil, But pausing most on Flesh—that praying against, Proposing yet denying the fixed wish! Closest expressed it's the most dangerous....

How would I say my prayers now, if I tried, Using what formula? Would instinct turn To

Gentle Jesus meek and mild
Look upon thy little child
To Gentle Jesus and the entrancing picture
Of Pretty mice in Plicity (where alas,
Is County Plicity now? Beyond what skyline?
I climbed in vain to-day).... When Rachel prays,
Does she still dreamily speak to Gentle Jesus,
The shepherd in that Nurnberg oleograph
Hanging above the nursery mantlepiece?
Her God? Anthropomorphic surely. One
Bearded like Moses, straddled on the clouds,
Armed with thunderbolts and shaggy eyebrows.

"Bless me, dear God, and make me a good child."
Her childishness obscures her womanhood.
When was I ever conscious in her presence
That she was bodily formed like other women
With womb for bearing and with breasts for suckling,
With power, when she desired, to rouse in me
By but the slightest art in diminution
Of her accustomed childish truthfulness,
A word or gesture hinting doubtfulness,
The angry stream flooding beyond restraint?
And yet no frisky wraith has come to-night
Assuming Rachel's body, goading me
With false presentment of her honest person
To mutiny and to utter overthrow;
No wanton Venus, no bold Helen of Troy.

For look, a different play performs to-night! See how come crowding in, with a bold air Of pertinence I do not dare to question This odd rag-tag-and-bobtail of lost souls, Ecclesiastical, furtive, dim, far gone In their dementia praecox! Doctor Hornblow On the Pentateuch, Dean Dogma upon Ruth (Ay, Ruth; the alien corn was not the worst) Keble and Pusey, Moody and Sankey griddling, And one most strange Victorian apparition, The ghost of Gladstone, with his stickout collars, Goes hand in hand with Senor Monkey-brand, Comrades who, printed on a paper cover, Gladstone in front and Monkey on the back, Made the Impregnable Rock of Holy Scripture Tacit defence of Darwin's blasphemies. There go the ghosts of Mason, Martin Tupper, Dean Farrar, South, Cautionary Mrs. Turner, Butterfield with a spotted senior clerk, And a long rabble of confusing figures,

Nuns, deacons, theologians, commentators, Spikes in birettas, missionaries like apes Hairy and chattering, bald; with, everyone, A book in the left hand tight clasped, the right Free to point scorn.

My cauliflower-wicked candle Gutters and splutters on the chair beside me, Over two books and a letter; the crowd passing Groans for reproach, confident in their numbers. But I, long used to crowds and their cowardly ways, Return these insults with the cold set eye

That break their corporate pride—
What? those are plays.

Yes, dramas by John Ford—Love's Sacrifice,
The Broken Heart, 'Tis Pity she's a Whore.
The titles shock? These things are "not convenient?"
Well, try this other by (ah) Canon Trout,
The Wisest Course of Love—why do you smile?
The book of plays I bought, this was a present,
Sent me with Rachel's letter—but you smile,
You're smiling still? Then I apologize,
Ladies and Lords. Indeed I never guessed
Humour was a luxury you admitted.
"'Tis pity she's a . . . postulant." Is it that?
Malicious hearts! but you still nod, laugh, point,
Pointing what joke? The Wisest Course of Love?
Yes?

I don't see. I'll buy it for a forfeit.
Then a red-haired beaky-nosed burly nun
Called Sister Agatha, so I tell myself,
Comes nearer, throws her veil aside, takes up
The envelope of the letter. Now she lays
A manicured finger on the office post-mark,
Leering down in my face.

You ugly she-bear. Wisest Course of Love

Is Maidenhead? Then you have read the letter? Dictated it quite likely? You, then, you! I know you, nun-official set to guide The postulants through their long penances And stern soul-searchings—with the twisted grin Of a bawd mistress, none too well concealed, You greeted Rachel in the Convent Hall, And peered and saw that she was beautiful, Giving her welcome with a sisterly kiss.

Mother Superior was quite satisfied After inquiry in Burke's Landed Gentry That the newcomer was a suitable Candidate for the Order of Seven Sorrows. It's so important to have ladies only! You twirl dear Mother round a little finger; You know her weaknesses, emotionalism, Snobbery, love of ritual; quite content To let her have her way in formal matters If you may mould the spirit of the place By due control of youthful aspirants, Postulants and novices—with the glow Of great devotion, honesty itself, You teach them hatred of their woman-flesh Eying their bodies with flagellant gaze Approving shame's rebellion. Maidenhead! A well spiced joke! The carnal maidenhead Untaken, but the maidenhead of spirit Stolen away. Rachel in your good care!

She says three years' probation. For three years Humiliation, then she takes the veil And goes for ever . . . "But of course, dear Friend, (Where did she learn "Dear Friend"?) Should I discover when I search my heart That God has sealed me for some other life,

That my intended vow of resignation Is only pride, why then I'm free again. I pray for you," etc., and etc. Dear Friend? lover or nothing it must be. I'm tired of friends, I'm past the need of friends.

We never talked religion till that day. I took for granted Rachel used her sense, Thought for herself without the aid of priests On spiritual matters: I? I never trouble About such talk one year's end to the next, But one day argument began; she started On Christian meekness, the low slavish virtue "Tapeinophrosune", obsequiousness, Which I called nonsense. "Nonsense?" (with wide eyes) "Or call it poetry. Christ was never meek. Let meekness crawl below in catacombs, Pride drives the money-changers with a scourge, Keeps silence to accusers, chooses death When an escape is more acceptable To justice than embarrassment of killing. I'm talking paradox? I never meant it." (Here I grew nettled at her wooden look) "And as for 'feeling Jesus in my heart' What does that mean? explain! I might acknowledge that historically All generous action flows from the prime source Of Jesus' teaching (though give Plato credit And Aristotle). But Jesus as a power Alive, praying, pleading like a ouija spirit, Or Laughing Eyes the séance influence, That's stupid and unnecessary, in my mind. I am a man, I am proud, Jesus was man and proud; He died fulfilling, and his soul found peace. I greet him friendly down the gulf of years." "But no!" she said "There is a Spirit of Jesus

Say what you like, there is a Spirit of Jesus." So I allowed her that, changing my front Saying, "If Jesus died on Cross, He's dead, In so far as Mary's son, the prophet died" But hardly was He dead, Than up this elemental demon sprang Assuming mastership of Jesus' school Using his body, even, so it's told Calling himself by name of Jesus Risen. Who was he? Some poor godling, fallen through pride And greed of human flesh, on evil days. He changed his heart and once more stood for power, A roaring lion in the white lamb's fleece, So by a long campaign of self-abasement And self-effacement grown mob-strong at length He overturned high Heaven, now rules the world. Yes, he's a powerful devil; we are his sons Got on she-furies of our Northern gales. We hate the inheritance entailed on us And the outlandish family coat we blazon, The tell-tale features also; would deny His fatherhood, but for that eye, that nose, Betraying Galilee our Father's land. There's no escape from him. Midwife Tradition Has knotted Jesus in our navel strings Never to be undone this side the grave." But that was one stage worse than blasphemy. And when we parted, she smiled grudgingly. I had said too much and cut her to the quick. She thought, poor child, she had her choice to make Between God's way and my way. And so she chose ... This letter . . . But she writes of Christian love. What is that? It's a most annoying habit, A warm blood-teasing smile, an open look, A recognition—thinks I to myself, Boy, this is fine! Love at first sight! True love!

But then the disillusionment—by God She turns the same look of those clear kind eyes On a bootblack, on some fool behind a counter. She calls that, Love? But what is Love to me? Love; it's a two-part game, I'd say, not merely The searching radiations from one eye, That fly about with indiscriminate force— Sometimes unthinking in a public place I stare at girls sitting sideface to me And wonder at their beauty, summing it up, Then being innocent girls (I'd never look At others so) they grow aware of the heat That pours out from my eyes; but do not see me. (I may be fifty feet away or more) They fidget in their seats, uncross their knees, Pull down their skirts to hide even their ankles, Blush furiously and gaze about, in trouble; Then I start guiltily, rise and walk away; But that's not Love, the searching and the heat; Love is an act of God, akin to Faith, Call it the union of two prayers by Faith (Here we come back to prayer by a long circuit And back to "God is Love") But to explain again what's Faith, what's prayer, That's the teaser! much too hard for me.

Still, these are not Christian monopolies. What's Faith but power stripped of its ornaments, Grants, title-deeds and such like accidentals; Force won by disentangling from the mind All hampering ties of luxury and tradition, Possessions, loyalties and hobby-horses? Cast all these overboard, and Faith is left, Faith potent through its prayer to miracles, Whether in name of Jesus or Jim Crow.

Prayer: Rachel seems to think the collects prayer, And Mother Superior, I make no doubt, Will teach her scores of neatly turned devotions Couched in diminutives and pastoral terms, (Lord, how I hate the *literary* prayer), Little white lambs indeed—O baa baa black sheep Have you any wool?—And Rachel in return Flushing with shame impetuously confesses, And holds half back, but crafty eyes are watching To drag all out, so Rachel has to tell How on the river bank one morning early The water was so clear, the sun so warm, She kissed me suddenly and was kissed by me— Lip kisses, that was all, and fingers clasped. Mother Superior then demanding further Will cross-examine her on how and why. "To tell it now will mortify the passion, Then when you make your general confession To Father James, your mind will have found peace." (A good excuse) "What then were your sensations, The physical joy, tell me, my erring lamb! Tell me, I beg, but as the sin was pleasant So must confession of the sin be pain . . . "

"Tis pity she's a whore". Rachel told all. Whore, traitress to the secret rites of love, Publisher of the not-communicable. If she refused the vows? If her heart changed? Rachel and I? This meek ex-novice rifled Of her love-secrets? medals and images Sewn in her skirts, Birmingham images From the totem-factory, niched in her heart? No, Love is fusion of Prayer, and prayer must be The flash of faith, unformulated words Demanding an accomplishment of Love

With noise of thunder, against circumstance, And Rachel forfeits there all power to love.

Who's this? For now the rabble have passed through, Going unnoticed out; Mother Superior Secretly with one finger at her lips, Re-enters, carefully locks my bedroom door, Now she disrobes with fingers trembling so They tear the fastenings—naked she steps out To practise with her long-past-bearing body The wiles of the Earthbound (Ah, the fine young man, The hot young man whose kisses tasted sweet To our new postulant!) Madam, I beg you! You have mistaken the room; no, next door sleeps A lusty bagman, he's the man to embrace you And welcome you with every brisk refinement Of passion. But while you rumple his sheets, The innocent and unhappy eyes of Rachel Bewilder me—Oh then in spite of Faith I am cast down—You nuns, but if I needed, As I no longer need, I'd challenge you To contest of hard praying, one against all. I could wrest Rachel back even to this bed To-night. But Faith, and Prayer that's born of Faith Find her slow mind impediment to their power, So I resign her—Agatha, do your worst.

The wisest course of Love? Yes, maidenhead. For me? Love's Sacrifice? It was not love. The Broken Heart? Not mine. I'll say no more Than mere goodbye. Go, get you to your nunnery, And out the candle! Darkness absolute Surrounds me, sleepy mother of good children Who drowse and drowse and cry not for the sun, Content and wisest of their generation.

EPILOGUE.

The morning star, over the mountains peering, Spoke to him not too distant for his hearing:—

I am the star of morning poised between The dead night and the coming of the sun, Yet neither relic of the dark nor pointing The angry day to come. My virtue is My own, a mild light, a relief, a pity And the remembering ancient tribe of birds Sing blithest at my showing; only Man Sleeps on and stirs rebellious in his sleep. Lucifer, Lucifer am I, millstone-crushed Between conflicting powers of doubleness, By envious Night lost in her myriad more Counterfeit glints, in day-time quite overwhelmed By tyrant blazing of the warrior sun. Yet some, my prophets who at midnight held me Fixedly framed in their observant glass, By daylight also, sinking well shafts deep For water and for coolness of pure thought Gaze up and far above them see me shining Me, single natured, without gender, one The only spark of Godhead unresolved.

But the lover gave no heed, so through his dreams Marched back the rabble rout, they glowered upon him But grown more awful and more reverend, Poor things before, now garbed in ancient dress, Bearded patriarchs and angry sybils Levites with censers, chariot riding kings, With comminations of hell fire and plague. Then even Nehushtan, the snake finger-post, Nehushtan which the credulous Hezekiah Spurned for superstitious, would have eased him, Or the bellowing voice of Aaron's molten calf.





